

Mad Folk News

My Highway Home

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For The Love of Lilacs

Death and I have been in a tug-of-war since I was nine years old. For the first part of my life, my Grandma K. lived next door to my family. Her house was a sanctuary. I am the youngest of seven children in my family of origin, and have always been

kept on serene and calm places. There is little serenity in a house filled with nine people and their extended community. So Grandma Kilbride's house was my sanctuary, a place where I could always go for a hug, a cookie, or some much needed quiet

time. She used to teach me how to water and spray her plants. She had an amazing indoor garden and had turned about ¼ of her living room into a plant sanctuary.

Column continued on third page

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- June 5 (Sat), 1-4pm: Common Chord @ Paoli Mill Park, Paoli WI (www.commonchord.us)
- July 8 (Thu), 5:30-8pm: Common Chord @ Verona Concerts in the Park, Harriet Park, Verona WI (www.commonchord.us)
- July 11 (Sun), 2-4pm: Common Chord @ Brix Cider, Mt. Horeb, WI (www.commonchord.us)
- Aug 12 (Thu), 6pm: Common Chord @ Gazebo Musikk, Stoughton, WI (www.commonchord.us)
- Sep 4 (Sat), 5-8pm: Common Chord @ Paoli Mill Park, Paoli WI (www.commonchord.us)

Behind Our House

Reserve space required. Contact A&D at annedave@chorus.net with questions.

- Sat, June 26th, @7pm - Willy Porter - \$25/person
- Fri, July 16th, @7pm - The Rough and Tumble - \$20/person

Farley Center Bluegrass with Down From the Hills

Contact 608-845-8724 or e-mail at programs@farleycenter.org with questions.

- Sat, June 5th, @5pm - Down From the Hills - \$15/person (Pay at the door)

When I was 9 years old, Grandma Kilbride died. She navigated a year-long struggle with cancer, and succumbed in May of that year. I remember friends coming to visit and saying, "Ellen, we're just so sorry you're sick." Grandma K. would respond with humor and reproach and nonchalance in equal parts, "I'm not sick, I'm dying. There's a difference."

The day of her death is etched in my consciousness. My family coordinated sitting vigil with her 24/7 during her last few weeks, in essence offering home hospice care with some guidance from visiting nurses. My parents and siblings prepared me for the moment of her passing, and talked about how Grandma K. would live in my heart. I knew what death was, or so I thought.

But on the evening when she finally died, I was filled with so much sadness and anger that I did not know what to do. It was hard for my nine-year-old psyche to integrate everything that I was feeling. I walked up and down the block to various neighbors' houses, bearing the sad tidings that Grandma had died. And after my solemn rounds, I returned to our front yard to see the Lilacs in full bloom.

I don't know what came over me. But I could not stand the beauty of them. Their vivid purple color was an offense. Their sweet, nearly saccharin odor was contemptible. I could not handle in my moment of loss, their immense audacity; daring to be beautiful and cheerful, and hopeful when I was so broken. I snapped. In full rage at having just lost my beloved grandmother and best friend, I picked up a big stick from underneath a nearby tree and I bludgeoned the Lilac hedge into oblivion. I beat it senseless until every blossom had been destroyed. Blow after blow I attacked the hedge. I was filled (I believe in retrospect) with the sense that the lilacs were taunting me somehow in my grief. I just could not abide by their obliviousness and unwavering beauty. When my world had fallen into such chaos, they had the ability to exist without care. The whole world should have stopped that day. But it did not. It kept going.

I beat the lilacs so hard it took nearly a decade for them to return in full glory. But they did return in splendor and majesty. That Lilac (tree would be a fairer assessment) was as old as the house, 1909. And it had seen

worse than a broken-hearted 9-year-old

And so it was, 10 years later nearly to the day, on the occasion of my father's death that I again had a deep interaction with the Lilacs in the front yard. But this time it was a very different sort of connection. Gentle. Grateful.

My dad had been working to help one of my older brothers with a project. I was helping too. I had just returned from the hardware store. Dad had sent me on an errand to fetch a bag of "1/4 20 hex nuts and a bottle of Welch's Grape Soda." Not long after I returned, Dad had a heart attack. I did CPR to no avail. I can tell you the precise moment of his passing. I was inches from his face, doing compressions and blowing air into his lungs. He was there one minute and gone the next. He hung on for a while, but then the light went out in his eyes and he was just gone to wherever we go.

As a Korean War Veteran and a kid who grew up in rural Minnesota during the depression, he knew how to fight. He was tender and kind, but he was also tenacious and determined. Nonetheless, on this particular day his body ran out of fight. Even as the paramedics arrived, I knew it was too late. As I have looked back over the years sifting for meaning, I think if there were one last lesson he had to impart to me, that was it. Life is precious. Life is a gift. The people we love, are a gift. Sometimes even the people we don't love are a gift. Love them while you can. We are here for an undetermined period of time. And when we go, it is a finite moment in time. Notice that moment. Honor the loss. Honor the love.

Late that afternoon, after Mom and I returned from the hospital, after time-of-death had been declared by the professionals, I went out into the front yard and looked at the Lilacs. My heart, once again was broken beyond measure. My mind wondering if I had been better at CPR, if Dad would still be alive? Autopsy later determined that no amount of CPR would have fixed his broken heart or mine. But there I was with my old friend, the Lilacs.

I walked across the front yard, the smell of fresh mown grass in the air. But this time I did not cause harm to these stunningly beautiful flowers. I cupped one cluster in my hand, draw-

ing its transformative and luminescent scent into my nostrils. Then I sat under its branches, like falling into the arms of a cherished friend, and I cried. I sobbed. The intensity of the day and the immensity of the loss just starting to really settle in. The sweet scent of beauty, the salt of tears, and the unrelenting angst of unquenchable grief merged. And in that singular moment, I came forever to appreciate Lilacs as my flower. Lilacs are my sacred bond with the divine, and that occasional reminder that we are human, that

Joe Jencks is 22-year veteran of the international Folk scene, an award winning songwriter and vocalist, and a contributing writer to numerous publications. For more information please visit: www.joejencks.com.

*Joe Jencks also hosts a monthly radio show called **My Highway Home** on the new Folk Music network – **Folk Music Notebook**. **MHH** features interviews with people Joe meets in his travels and music by many artists from the big tent that is Folk Music. Tune in on the second Sunday of each month at 5:00 PM CT. Rebroadcast at 10:00 PM CT on the same night and again the following Wednesday at 11:00 AM CT. Upcoming interviews include **Carol Maillard of Sweet Honey in The Rock**, **Peggy Seeger**, and more. Several past episodes are archived through **Folk Music Notebook**.*

*Listen in online via:
www.folkmusicnotebook.com*

SERPENT'S TEARS - RICHARD THOMPSON
2021 - DOWNLOAD AVAILABLE ON BANDCAMP



Review by Kiki Schueler

It seems that the pandemic has made Richard Thompson nostalgic. But it's not for his days in Fairport Convention or the 60's, unless, perhaps, you are talking about the 1660's. The bulk of the six songs on *Serpent's Tears*, his second EP since we all started working from home, have a distinctly madrigal quality and wouldn't sound out of place strummed on a lute in King Arthur's Court, or at least a Renaissance Festival. Even the cover art begs to be embroidered on silk and hung from the castle wall. Like the *Bloody Noses* EP released last June, *Serpent* was recorded entirely in his home studio with Thompson playing all the instruments. As before, the only outside help comes in the voice of girlfriend Zara Phillips. While *Noses* sounded exactly like a home recording, stripped down and soulful, his most recent is lush, a surprisingly full sound from the one-man band.

The opening and closing tracks are the most likely to make you think of turkey legs, jugglers and jesters. "Tinker's Rhapsody" features nimble voice and fretwork. Its light, skipping melody is akin to "Wild Mountain Thyme," while the lyrics extol the care-free days of a tinker. Though lines like "Dry leaves caress me, warm breezes bless me, and the songbirds confess me, at the break of the day" do make it

sound more like the fairytale existence of Snow White. The realities of life on the road for an itinerant tinsmith in the olden days aren't completely ignored, "Though winter time is tough now, and the living is rough now, the firewood is rotten, and I shiver all day," but it quickly gives way to a "June morning so sweet, all hardships are forgotten on a fine summer's day." There's no doubt it's the tinker's life for him. The record closes with "When I Was Drunk," a mug waving, barroom singalong doubling down as a murder ballad. While the narrator quickly confesses to having killed a man while under the influence, it isn't till the third verse that you find out why. The mournful chorus "When I was drunk, I killed a man, and now I drink no more. No more, no more, now I drink I no more," makes it sound as though he regrets the loss of his drink more than the loss of life. I can't blame him when "a glass would help to numb the cold and put the world to right." Pity he had to go a kill a man for spilling his beer. It's preceded by the funereal "Widow's Walk." It's your (almost) standard lost at sea tale- the widow mourning her lost love, even as she wonders if he has "another life, Shanghai, new passport, three kids and wife."

In between the minstrel fare exists the surprisingly dirge-y love song "As I Hold You," the drama of "The Big Love Scene," and the almost-rocking "When the Saints Rise Out of Their Graves." The latter could be the prequel to the Mardi Gras classic, detailing what happens before they come marching in. It features that distinctive Thompson Fender Strat sound, which always has me wondering why his name isn't mentioned in more Guitar God conversations. It's the kick this mostly subdued re-

cord needed. Meanwhile "Love Scene" is anything but, with a lot of "supposed to's" before it fades to black. "You were supposed to be too weak to resist me, your heart supposed to flip, but you didn't read the script." The darkly clever lyrics ("you didn't want my heart, you wanted my head... in a basket") prove again he wields words just as nimbly as he wields a guitar. Available exclusively as a Bandcamp download, "Serpent's Tears" is a bargain at its six-dollar price tag.

Mad Folk News is published monthly by the Madison Folk Music Society, a non-profit, volunteer-led society dedicated to fostering folk music in the Madison area. Contact us at madfolk@charter.net. Learn about concerts, membership, scholarships, and volunteer opportunities at www.madfolk.org. www.facebook.com/pages/Madison-Folk-Music-Society/34497984835

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Album:

LET'S GET HAPPY TOGETHER

Maria Muldaur and Tuba Skinny

The great **Jim Kweskin Jug Band** of the 60s, of whom I've spoken in previous Whither Zithers, had a style my music partner Lou and I tried to incorporate into our own weird little jug band of those days. Turns out, incidentally, that the Kweskin Jug Band Style was largely a reincarnation of the African American **Memphis Jug Band** of Will Shade and others, which the Kweskin band freely credited. This Memphis band played from the mid 20s to the late 50s; most of the songs we learned from Kweskin recordings were actually Memphis Jug Band arrangements.

Anyway the Kweskin band featured the captivating presence and joyous singing of a woman named **Maria Muldaur** (Maria D'Amato then, until she married bandmate **Gooff Muldaur**). I adore her singing. Not because of vocal acrobatics, but because of the way she listens to her lyrics and sings them like she means them. A bunch of us drove down from Appleton, where we were attending the UW Fox Valley campus, to Madison's UW Union Theater to catch a show by this band in 1966.

Toward the end of the sixties, because of life, I pretty much lost track of the music scene. As it turns out, Maria Muldaur has continued her career passionately. I remember when her **Midnight at the Oasis** came out in the 70s, but I didn't follow her beyond that. Lou went to see her at our ol' **Club de Wash** one time in the dim past, where Maria put on something of a cabaret show. Now and then I would listen to an old Kweskin LP and wonder what ever happened to those folks.

Meanwhile a few years ago I happened upon and became immediately hooked on the music of a New Orleans street band called **Tuba Skinny**. I wrote about them in Whither Zither for June 2014, and went to see them twice when they came to Wisconsin, once at Madison's **High Noon Saloon** and once at the **Stoughton Opera House**. Gosh they're good. Their music is what is often called Traditional Jazz, but is

really that jug-bandish kind of jazz and blues that you hear on the streets of New Orleans. Led by an astonishing trumpet player named **Shaye Cohen**, and usually also featuring a trombone, a clarinet, a tuba, a banjo, a guitar, and a washboard, they often are joined by a fabulous part-time singer named **Erika Lewis** who also bangs tastefully on a bass drum that she sometimes sits on. If you haven't heard them, go to YouTube and search for Tuba Skinny; there are hundreds of videos.

So imagine my surprise and delight to come upon the announcement that Maria Muldaur had discovered Tuba Skinny and they had recorded an album together! Yow! Not only that, my songwriting pal **Maury Smith** clued me in to a May 6th interview with Maria about the album on New Orleans community radio station **WWOZ 90.7FM**. They were hosting a preview concert the next day which as of this writing is available as a video on YouTube at:

<https://youtu.be/Bm0yUQf5Gms>

This show is a treasure and I hope it's still available when you read this. The introductions -- which are not on the CD -- to the songs are fascinating and valuable, and there is something special about watching Maria and the band perform together.

Maria was asked by **Michael Dominici** of WWOZ's **New Orleans Music Show** how she discovered Tuba Skinny:

A couple years ago I was shopping in my favorite clothing store... and I heard this wonderful vintage jazz floating out over the speakers... and I remarked to the woman how cool it was that the local radio station would be playing such cool... music and she said oh that's not the radio that's a CD and she proceeded to tell me about Tuba Skinny... I didn't believe her 'cause I've studied this kind of music all my life ...and I was SURE it was an old recording from the 20s. She had to show me the album before I would believe her...

In January of this year Maria was invited to perform at the **Folk Alliance International Conference** in New Orleans. She couldn't afford to bring her whole band from California so she got in touch with Tuba Skinny and asked if they'd like to join her. They played a set together at the conference and it went over great. A record company

executive was there and asked if they'd like to make an album. They jumped at the chance. Marie put together a list of 20s and 30s jazz numbers. At the suggestion of OZ radio they put on the aforementioned preview concert at the **Dew Drop Benevolent and Social Club** in Mandeville (which is just across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans). Says Maria of this place:

[This club was] built in 1895 ...by the local black community out in Mandeville who wanted to have their own community center and venue for music. It's been... restored to its original condition and... the walls are dripping with history and good mojo and good vibes.

Maria was asked what she likes about Tuba Skinny and she said she felt the band was "almost channeling the whole rhythm and vibration of a bygone era." (I would add that technically, what strikes me about Tuba Skinny is their sense of dynamics. Their volumes are so beautifully controlled that the interplay is like a conversation.)

One cool aspect of this album: Tuba Skinny is a pretty somber bunch. Even live, they seem personally subdued, though I'm probably misinterpreting that. Maria Muldaur is just the opposite. Though very serious about her reverence for the music, she adds a sense of joy to the scene. Somehow these two contrasting approaches shuffle together into what I think is a masterpiece.

One final note. You will probably recognize that most of the source material for Tuba Skinny's and Maria Muldaur's repertoires is African American. They are all very aware of this and work at giving black artists recognition and support whenever they can. Recently Shaye Cohen posted a message of support for the protests of the murder of **George Floyd** and was horrified to find, sprinkled among overwhelmingly supportive responses, some words from white supremacists. Shocked to find these ignorant people among their fans, Shaye wrote a moving 780 word response on their Facebook page, which is still there as of this writing. Search for Tuba Skinny on Facebook. She ends her message with "May we continue to dismantle all systems of oppression. Peace and love and safety to you all." Amen.

Album available on iTunes, Amazon, etc.

WZ for June 2021

"WHEN IS MY RENEWAL DUE?"

(Hint: It is NOT the date on the mailing label!)

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